196 Amhara provinces, but is entering through the provincial capitals, such as Gondar, at the present time. Semantic drift can be traced along these lines.

d) Literature; Special Argots.

538 The religious character of most of the traditional Amharic-Geez literature has already been described in connection with the church.

Some of the material of liturgy finds its way into lay usage. Rhymes, "qetem", originally composed for devotional poetry, have long found their way to chants of praise sung to warlords, feudal nobles, the king, and by extension, philosophic-sentimental poetry in general.

Folk literature, which is oral, contains numerous stories resembling Aesop's fables, in which witty repartee among or with animals is featured (Footnote 89).

538 Individual poets and other authors, if they existed in number,
● 522 have largely been forgotten, because of the cultural prohibition against writing down any but sacred matter, and the restricted literacy. But a fortunate exception exists in the person of an Amhara wit named Alaqa (lit. chief, an honorific title) Gäbre-Hanna, who was a contemporary of Emperor Menelik II in the late 19th century. (Footnote 90) He, too, apparently did not write down any of his many witticisms, but since he lived fairly recently, commuting between his home in Gondar and the then incipient city of Addis Ababa, he is still popularly as well as officially identified with his stories in both localities, and some of the anecdotes even tie his person to historical events.

Footnote 89 - Courlander & Leslau: The Fire on the Mountain, 1950

Footnote 90 - Messing, S. D.: Ethiopian Folktales ascribed to the 19th Century Wit, Alaqa Gäbre-Hanna. (in) Journal of American Folklore, Jan - March 1957, pp. 69-72.

538 He was a master of "sowasso"; of the pun which utilizes gemina-
522 tion and other grammatical possibilities to make an ironic observation and befuddle the unwary, so that they become public laughing stocks. Sometimes the joke was on his own Rabelaisian appetites in food and sex. More often he spoofed the pompousness of feudal and even royal powers, their love for amassing rules and regulations for their courts; and the pretended puritan piety of the priests, behind which facade he recognized witty insight into the minds of men, whose salty comments and behavior in private life he liked to burlesque. For example:

[539] "One day the servant of a witty priest suffered from a chigger (sandflea) embedded in his foot. The priest pried it out with a pin and threw it into the fire. A friend, watching this, objected jokingly, saying: "Why did you do this? May it not multiply in the fire?" Replied the priest: "It may be warmed, but not 'done up' ("yäzäräw" - also means begotten through sexual intercourse)."

Amhara listeners find such "impolite" stories extremely amusing.

195 The Amhara people recognize the esoteric use that can be made of
198 their language, and they utilize this. Hence the expression "he is talking Amarinya", meaning "he is speaking in esoteric ways", with double meanings, hidden meanings, to becloud his real purpose so that he cannot be accused of lying and can say later that he meant something else. For example, the verb "qanna" can have the following meanings:

was right, direct, correct
was honest, just
succeeded, prospered
became jealous, envious
became zealous, fanatic, intolerant.

198 Certain occupational specialties have traditionally made use of

576 Very Polite: "shängo wätta" - (lit. he went to a meeting).

514 Extremely Polite: "qwaro sorä" - (lit. he left home).

192 Extremely Polite: "shersher wätta" - (lit. he went for a walk).

522 Wit, used in court or by homespun philosophers to entertain their friends, compensates for the many formalities in this culture and society. The famous wit, Alläqa Gäbre-Hanna has already been cited. 538 Proverbs, "tärät" and riddles may be used to make a comment of esoteric meanings, understandable only to one's initiates. Proverbs fulfill a social function, beyond mere entertainment, for even philosophy, being utilized to begin any negotiation, such as for marriage. This is emphasized in proverbs on proverbs:

[539]

"Like Halleluyah before the chanting (in church),
(begin with) a proverb before the discussion".
"(to drink) mead, (first get) a container,
to talk, (begin with) a proverb".

538 Proverbs and riddles used by parents, teachers and leaders of
593 society have a pedagogic function, and can be used to reprimand and
[861] instruct. Conflict between father and son, the complexities involved, and the possibility that contrary to the major cultural assumption of parental superiority, the son may sometimes have logic on his side, is indicated by the following:

[539] "(Says the father):

"Your Father you cannot accuse (e.g. in court, shaming yourself)
nor plow the sky,
nor roast water".

"(Replies the son):

"The father, by his own shame he will stand accused;
the sky, by lighting it is plowed;
water, in a pot it is steamed".

ETHIOPIAN FOLKTALES ASCRIBED TO THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AMHARA WIT, ALÄQA GÄBRE-HANNA:—Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia today, is gradually becoming the *lingua franca* of the empire. Until recently it was spoken mainly on the fertile highland plateau of central and northwestern Ethiopia, in part of what was formerly known as Abyssinia. Predominantly Coptic Christian, the Amhara people have sacred writings in Ge'ez, old Ethiopic. Amharic has adapted this ancient script to its own use. The folklore of the Amhara is mainly oral (except for religious texts) and represents a crosscurrent of Middle Eastern and African cultures. Traditionally, Amhara society was one of priests, feudal lords, and peasants. Lower on the social scale were non-Coptic ethnic groups who performed such important economic functions as ironsmithing and pottery-making.

This is reflected in the folklore. On non-religious, everyday subjects, the wit of the Amhara is peasant-like, earthy, full of tales of Rabelaisian appetites and sly solutions to human problems. The Amharic language lends itself readily to puns and hidden meanings, since many verbs can have double or triple interpretations due to the hidden variations in the basic verbal stem and the absence or presence of gemination of some consonants. The listener must pay close attention. If he misinterprets the context and fails to discern the pun, he is often made the butt of the next tricky joke by those who have heard it before. The more a storyteller and wit masters the *sowaso* 'grammar' of the Amharic language, the better he can manipulate this humor.

A master of this art was *Aläqa* 'Chief' (an honorary title) Gäbre-Hanna, a contemporary of Emperor Menelik just before the end of the nineteenth century. As far as is known, he never put into writing any of his stories, witticisms, linguistic gymnastics, and philosophical puns. But to this day the peasants and even the nobles remember his stories well and tell them so often that a number of versions have developed.

He was a native of Gondar and had all the provincial pride of the "Gondarey" in the one-time greatness of this town and district that is now back country. He lived at the time the present capital, Addis Ababa, was being built and the King of Shoa had become Emperor of Abyssinia. Like many another "Gondarey," Aläqa Gäbre-Hanna pretended to disdain the newfangled importations of Emperor Menelik and the growing employment of subjugated Galla tribal chiefs at the imperial court. Jokingly, he took the liberty of referring to the Emperor's home province, Shoa, as "that Galla province." (Even today much Galliña is spoken there, a result of the sixteenth century conquest of the area by Galla tribes.) No one else would have dared such a remark, but he was popular with Emperor Menelik and especially with the Empress Taitu, and could tell them certain frank truths and tease them with irony in a semi-polite manner. However, he was not a court jester.

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

538 Since Adam your lip did eat of that Tree
539 The Savior my heart has been hung up for thee.
19

In this couplet the wax of Adam's sin and Christ's crucifixion in his behalf has been used as a form in which to pour a love message. A literal translation of the wax of the couplet is:

Because Adam ate of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge
The Savior of the World has been crucified for thee.

To savor the gold of the couplet fully, one must know that the verb meaning "was crucified," *tasaqala*, may also signify "is anxious to be near." So a literal translation of the gold would be:

Because of your [tempting] lips
My heart is anxious to be near thee.

538 19 In other more commonly used figures, the duplexity of the message becomes less explicit. In figures known as ***hiber and merīmer***, the wax and gold are combined in the same word or phrase instead of being put side by side. These figures thus correspond to the English pun. In verses which employ these figures the wax is often but a contrived and transparent excuse for getting to the real point, which appears only in the pun line. Such verses are highly prized, however, for the Amhara tends to regard the pun as a very high form of humor. Here are two examples of Amharic couplets based on simple puns:

[522] 538 539 522 19

(1) *Ya-mīn ṭiqem ṭallā ya-mīn ṭiqem ṭajji*
Tallāt sishañu bunā adargaw enji.

Of what use is *ṭallā*, of what use is *ṭajji*?•
When seeing an enemy off, serve him coffee.

(2) *Yābbāt eddā la-lījj yebāl nabar dero:*
Bāyāt eddā gabāhu ennē-mā 'zandero.

In olden times a father's debt was passed down to his son;
But here I have a debt today by grandfather begun.

The pun in the first example lies in the phrase ***bunā adargaw*** ("serve him coffee"), which by elision becomes ***bun adargaw*** ("reduce him to ashes"). In the second couplet the pun hinges on the word ***bāyat***, which signifies "grandfather" but may also be understood to represent ***bāyhuāt*** ("because I saw her"). The gold meaning of this couplet is thus: It used to be said that one inherited the debt of one's father, but in my case it was the sight of her that put me into debt.

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[273] • *Tallā* is a kind of beer made from barley. *Tajj* (pronounced *tajji* here for the sake of rhyme) is mead.

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

words often carry *double-entendrè* as a matter of course; when he listens, he is ever on the lookout for latent meanings and hidden motives. As one of my Ethiopian colleagues has said: "Wax and gold is anything but a formula—it is a way of life." 538 181

In essence, wax and gold is simply a more refined and stylized manifestation of the Amhara's basic manner of communicating. This manner is indirect, often secretive. Amharic conversation is larded with vague remarks like *Mīn yeshāllāl?* ("What is better?") when the speaker has failed to indicate what is the issue at hand, or *Tādyās!*, an interjection which can mean almost anything. Often, when the speaker is then quizzed about the issue at hand, he will give an answer that does not reveal what is really on his mind at all, and even when he does, the person with whom he is talking is likely to interpret his response as a disguise. 195 521 538

Wax and gold embodies this fundamental indirection in speech by means of the studied use of ambiguity. Apart from its literary and religious manifestations, wax and gold appears in the common life of the traditional Amhara on a variety of occasions and serves a number of diverse functions. 195 182 538

It provides the medium for an inexhaustible supply of humor, among a wry people who prefer the clever, double-edged remark to comic actions or incongruous situations. This includes the wit of daily life—the invention of puns and sly retorts, the telling and retelling of good anecdotes and famous lines—as well as the more formalized humor on festive occasions, where minstrels sing the *sam-ennā warq* verses extemporized by the guests. 538 195 182 522

It provides a means for insulting one's fellows in a socially approved manner, in a culture which requires fastidious etiquette in social relations and punishes direct insults by heavy fines. *Sam-ennā warq* insulting, too, has its more stylized expressions, as at the drink-house, where one may find persons competing in a prolonged exchange of more or less disguised insults, or in time of political or military conflict, when opposing lords were wont formerly to satirize one another with ambiguous couplets. 538 195 182 578

It provides a technique for defending the sphere of privacy against excessive intrusion, in a social order that thrives on rumor and gossip and puts most of its people at the mercy of superiors. While vague and evasive responses often suffice to dampen the enthusiasm of the tax collector or the curious neighbor, *sam-ennā warq* constitutes another potent weapon of self-defense. 538 195 182 571 [521]

Finally, it provides the one outlet for criticism of authority figures in a society which strictly controls every kind of overt aggression toward authority, be it parental, religious, or political. Thus it has been a safety valve for certain social tensions, enabling, for example, witty individuals to satirize the monarch himself and still live to repeat the witticism—so long as its subject was himself duly appreciative of the cleverness of the lines. 538 195 182 578 571 [687] [522]

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

older or more prestigious males are addressed as *gāshē* ("my shield"); the corresponding term for females is *etēyē* ("my sister"). Much older people are addressed by words signifying "father" or "mother."

It is true that the forms of respect toward superiors are often repeated mechanically and sometimes serve to cover up a distinctly hostile disposition toward certain superiors. They nevertheless do represent to some extent a genuine solidaristic sentiment—perhaps the most profound and influential social sentiment in the Amhara social system. It rests in the last analysis on the fact that the Amhara family develops a pronounced sense of filial devotion as well as habits of filial obedience. Amhara society can dispense with horizontal solidarities and communal attachments because it is held together, sufficiently for traditional purposes, at least, by an infinite network of "father-son" relationships.

The egoistic element in the hierarchical pattern is further modified by a sort of joking relationship that sometimes develops between inferiors and superiors. The harsh interrogation of inferiors at times shades into a sort of wry banter; sons or servants may be called "thief" or "scoundrel" in an undertone of unmistakable affection. At times, moreover, the direction of the jesting may be reversed. Amhara servants are noted for playing practical jokes on their masters, which the latter usually appreciate when the jests are clever.[21] Here again, wax and gold is the perfect medium—for expressing aggression against a superior while at the same time appearing to maintain the respect relationship. The following couplet, attributed to Naggādrās Tassamā Eshatē, aptly illustrates this genre:

Ennānts maḳuānnentotch ba-mīn waṭ balātchu?
Eññām ba-shurwātchen ennāntam bāssātchu.

What sauce, my lords, was on your plate?
We had but peas; 'twas fish you ate.[22]

Here the poet appears to be complimenting the nobles on their more elegant cuisine at a banquet; but there is a pun on the word *bāssātchu*, literally "with your fish," for it may also be taken to mean "you took more than your share."

Within the hierarchical pattern, finally, one finds expressed a certain amount of generosity which, as we have suggested, is relatively uncommon in relations among peers. This appears in connection with the *begging* and *almsgiving* which occur in many sectors of Amhara society. For church students beyond the elementary level, begging is the primary means of livelihood. Youths who have left home to study *zēmā* or *qenē* with a master wander about today, as in former times, carrying small baskets and pleading: "For the sake of Mary! For the sake of God!" in order to get their daily morsels. The activity is so organized that when a large number of students

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

resist taking responsibility and showing initiative. In general, they reveal little capacity for self-discipline in a collective setting.

The need for what can be accomplished through the new associations, however, transcends the intermittent obstacles to their effective functioning posed by such individualistic behavior. As modernization proceeds and as Ethiopians gain experience in these associations, one may expect that the more disruptive aspects of such behavior will be transformed in the direction of greater compliance with the implicit norms of group functioning. Amhara in the modernizing sector have no choice now but to replace the ethos of the *shĭftā*, the litigant, and the wandering student with that of the president, secretary, and treasurer if they are to remain true to the ambitions that have been awakened within them.

There are, moreover, a number of respects in which adequate functioning in modern groups may be supported by behavioral traits inherited from the past. Three of these traits in particular deserve to be mentioned in this context. One is the fundamentally respectful orientation toward others. This serves to reduce the outbreak of dissension among group members, and in the attitude of respect and obedience toward figures of authority provides the basis, given capable and decisive leaders, for a significant amount of concerted action among group members. A second trait of some importance is the acceptance of conflict as a natural and not particularly threatening component of human relations. This means that group members are ready to admit and deal with such conflicts as do emerge in their ranks, and are experienced in the resolution of such conflicts through the agency of elderly mediators or the more formal processes of litigation. Finally, the Amhara sense of humor—wry, realistic, attuned to the ironies of existence—introduces a salutary leavening ingredient into group process. It provides an outlet for the release of tensions in group situations and adds a certain flavor to group experience that often more than compensates for the lack of a hyperinstrumental orientation.

The Question of Individuality

Although effective modernization is unthinkable without a significant increase in solidaristic sentiments and rationalized organization, in Ethiopia as elsewhere, the fate of the other aspect of individualism discussed in this chapter—individuality as a cultural value—poses a more controversial question. If the essence of modernity is the systematic effort to control rationally man's physical and social environment, then the society of *1984* may be claimed as a possible modern utopia no less than the society in which all children go to Montessori schools and all adults paint, undergo psychoanalysis, and study Great Books. The cultivation of individuality stands as but one of many pos-